

10.3. STUDENTS*

Students form a link between the community and schools. While one part of them comprises external factors that impact school safety another part of them comprises internal factors. Unlike with community and parental factors, schools tend to have more control over student factors in maintaining a safe school environment.

This section highlights various aspects of student themes like student behavior, trigger points of student violence, and student crime. Themes pertaining to student crime in turn discuss various types of student violence like assaults, deaths, fights, gangs, hate crimes, hazing, substance abuse, thefts, vandalism and graffiti, and weapons.

Student crime: Assaults

Assaults are a lot more severe than fights and were discussed as very common by interviewees in many schools. Twenty two percent of the respondents (six principals, one SRO, and seven teachers) discussed assaults in their schools in course of the interviews.

Nature of assaults

Assaults in schools can take various forms like students assaulting each other for specific personal reasons, for racial reasons, and students assaulting staff. In the words of a principal (cell 14) assaults tend to be more severe and often have very specific reasons. *“Assaults have a tendency to be a bit more severe, they also have a tendency to have more substantive reasons. This person's been bothering me and I've just had it, he passed by my street and he egged my house, or he said something bad to my girlfriend”*.

Another principal (cell 13) agreed that personal relationships could lead to assaults. *“We had an individual that had a relationship with a girl. Her brother took exception to the relationship and towards the end of the school year he came up from behind the victim when he was talking and attacked him. He assaulted him, struck him in the head a couple of times, and when he was on the ground he kicked him a couple of times. Assault chargers were filed against the perpetrator and he was suspended from school”*.

In addition to personal reasons, many assaults are caused because of racial tensions also. In the words of one teacher (cell 11) *“a couple Hispanic kids got suspended for hitting a White kid, taking off their bandana and putting some tools in it, like sockets, and beating him over the head. We have kids coming from different communities and there was a conflict between them. It could have also been because of race”*.

Not only do students assault other students but they can also assault their teachers or staff. Safety concerns are, therefore, not limited just to the students. According to a teacher (cell 16) *“there was a student that had taken a swing at the principal in the front office and I had to restrain that student on the floor until the authorities arrived”*.

* See Appendix 2 for cell references in text.

Not surprisingly, staff can also assault other staff in the school if they have misunderstandings or tensions of any kind. In the words of a teacher (cell 5) *“it's been a bizarre year, kids are getting much better, we have had teachers accosting teachers”*.

Special education students

Given the nature of their problems, special education students very often end up assaulting their peers in the school. This is a safety concern both for the special education student, who may or may not be aware of the repercussions, and for their classmates. A principal (cell 12) discussed one such incident. *“We have a student who's mentally ill. He attempted to throw some equipment at a student and missed her, but he absolutely emotionally terrified the class. He also threw an object at his special education teacher and missed her, and damaged some school property”*.

In summary, this section discussed assaults in schools. The respondents' perceptions on the cause for assaults ranged from personal factors to racial factors. Assaults against staff and inter-staff assaults were also discussed by the respondents in course of the interviews.

Student crime: Deaths

Student deaths are fortunately not very common in schools. However, students do die frequently outside the school by committing suicides or by getting into fights with gang members, etc. Eight percent of the interviewees (one principal and four teachers) discussed student deaths in course of the interviews.

Death in the school

Accidental death can take place in the school in course of a fight or a playground activity. Even though such incidents are accidental they are a huge safety concern to schools at any given time. One teacher (cell 5) discussed one such incident. *“We had a student who was playing basketball on the court at around lunchtime. There was an argument over he fouled me no he didn't kind of thing and one student kicked another in the solar plexus and he died”*.

Gang related deaths

Students often associate with gang members outside the school. Sometimes they get into fights with them, which can lead to death in the extreme cases. While such incidents take place outside the school they still negatively impact the school climate. One teacher (cell 9) revealed *“we've had students that have been killed as part of gang activity but never on campus. We have never to my knowledge had a serious injury at school, meaning someone stabbed. We had a student get stabbed right off campus, maybe five years ago, and it was probably fifteen minutes after school”*.

Suicides

In course of the interviews suicides were discussed as mostly taking place outside the school premises. In the words of one teacher (cell 9) *“it's an attrition thing. If they're really bad or if their problems are very severe they leave. We've had a few suicides over the years, but not on campus”*.

In summary, this section discussed the experiences of interviewees with students dying either within or outside the school premises. While some of the deaths in the discussion pertained to students from the school, others like suicides and gang-related deaths did not.

Student crime: Fights

Of all the student-related crimes that were discussed by respondents in course of the interviews, fights were considered the most common, next to bullying, intimidation, and name-calling. Seventy two percent of the respondents (one aide, one bus driver, two heads of security, fourteen principals, three SROs, and twenty-five teachers) discussed school fights in course of the interviews.

New trends

Some respondents considered the nature of physical fights more violent in schools today. One principal (cell 14) shared that violence and rage have become more common in fights now which is problematic from a safety standpoint. *“When I started off there were quite a few fights and that was problematic and we have since reduced them. But the trend that I'm seeing is that while we're having fewer fights over the years the fights we have tend to be more violent, they seem to be these knock out drag out affairs and they can get real messy. It's almost a rage when we do see the violent aspect in kids and that is a problem”*.

Another trend that was noted by the respondents was that fights now frequently tend to take place between groups rather than one on one. In the words of a teacher (cell 9) *“we didn't have just as many fights back then, they weren't gang related, and they didn't cause seven people on nine people kind of fighting. Back then when we had a fight, I didn't like you, so we fought. Now it's I don't like you, I got my nine buddies and you got your seven buddies and we're going to meet outside of school and have this big fight”*.

Time variations

The respondents perceived that fights seem to occur more frequently during certain times of the year. One SRO (cell 15) perceived that *“when school begins, it happened like that last year and it happened like this year, it's like everybody's so excited to be back at school. But they all hate each other so that's why we have all these fights. And then throughout the year it calms down”*.

Just like respondents perceived certain times of the year more prone to fights, they also perceived certain times of the day as more prone to fights. In the words of a principal (cell 13) fights are more likely to occur at *“lunch time probably. We have more students for a longer period of time interacting, we'll have some students that will maybe start discussions or arguments, bullying, that kind of thing”*.

Another principal (cell 9) added, *“it doesn't seem to happen in the morning. It's before they go home and get on the bus, because they think they can get away with it if it's at the end of the day”*.

Fights also tend to be more frequent between classes according to some respondents. In the words of a principal (cell 15) *“most of our fights happen during passing periods, meaning when the kids are going between classes”*.

Gender variations

Although fighting incidents involve both girls and boys some variations were noted by the respondents. In the words of a principal (cell 9) *“this year we seem to have more girl fights than we do boy fights”*. On the other hand, another principal (cell 2) noted that *“it has been male dominated when it comes to fighting”*.

Grade variations

Fights were perceived as taking place at all grades, but the more serious ones take place in the higher grades. In discussing the grades where the maximum fights take place, one principal (cell 2) commented *“it would be more of a 6th, 7th and 8th grade level where they're socially trying to fit in. They got their little groups, this group's trying to be a little cooler than the other group type of thing. They're going through a lot of things in life, emotionally, socially, with their bodies”*.

In the words of another principal (cell 5) *“the more serious fights are probably with the 8th grade. Where students actually draw blood type of situation, whereas, normally in the 6th and 7th grade they're just learning how to fight, it's not as serious ninety percent of the time. We try to resolve it at a lower level and at times the police are called and at times they are arrested. If they're chronic they're definitely arrested”*.

In summary, this section discussed the perceptions of the interviewees with respect to fights in schools. The new trends in fights were discussed. Variation in fights by time of the day and year, gender, and grade level were also discussed by the respondents in course of the interviews.

Student crime: Gangs

Prevalence of gangs has become problematic for many schools in the recent past. Sixty six percent of the respondents (three heads of security, twelve principals, three SROs, and twenty-four teachers) shared their perceptions on various issues pertaining to gangs in schools.

Problems

Many interviewees observed the problems that can be caused by gangs in schools, all the way from intimidation to discipline, and how they can make the general environment unsafe for the students and staff. In the words of a principal (cell 5) gang members in schools are more prone to intimidation when compared to any other activity. *“If there is anything a gang is doing is maybe more intimidation than anything. Intimidating kids to be in the gang, or trying to establish territoriality in terms of the gang, more than I would say doing drugs or that kind of thing”.*

On the other hand, there are gangs that do create a very negative school environment by harassing students and staff and causing criminal damage. According to a SRO (cell 15) *“we have a gang on the bottom floor, harassing students and a couple staff. The girls that are involved always want to fight somebody else. In reference to the males involved, they're not liking one of the aides and they target her and they do their best to pick on her. I'm not doubting that they have substance abuse, probably drug of choice being marijuana. Every once in a while they'll do some type of criminal damage.”*

One teacher (cell 9) revealed that a bulk of the discipline problems in schools are caused by gangs. *“They are the bulk of our discipline problems. You take them away and the average student really is pretty safe and abides by the rules. They're here [in school] because it's a social activity, where else are you going to find four hundred other people to hang around with. What they're doing, primarily they're doing to each other, they're intimidating each other, constant clang for status. It's a constant kind of a claw to see who's on top, lots of posturing, lots of acting out”.*

Students belonging to gangs often indicate their affiliations through the kinds of attire and accessories that they wear. One head of security (cell 14) noted that *“as far as walking around and actually advertising gang stuff, a couple years ago it was bad. There were shoe laces, bandanas, certain colors, certain ways you wore your hat, a certain way you might wear a necklace or some kind of a chain”.* Schools constantly struggle to identify such symptoms in order to update their dress codes and policies and to keep their schools safe.

Variations by gender, age, and ethnicity

Some respondents commented on gang variations with respect to gender, age, and ethnicity, and how they have evolved over a period of time. In the words of a principal (cell 9), with respect to gender variations, *“girls are more involved in the gangs than they used to be”.* Such indicators are vital when it comes to designing policies for school safety.

Age and grade variations have been observed in gang related incidents. One teacher (cell 9) commented that *“we still have more kids getting into gangs and it's starting down at a real young age. I'd say twenty percent of our kids, grade 7-12 are, belong to a gang or claim gang affiliation or are following that lifestyle and way of acting. But I think the*

percentage of our kids that are being involved in gangs overall is a little less than it was”.

Gang activities have had a tendency to vary by ethnicity. Although, some respondents felt that the trends are now changing. According to a principal (cell 15) the ethnic composition of gangs in schools has changed over time. *“We have more than one gang here on campus. We're probably looking at four or five that I might be able to identify. At one time it would be along ethnic boundaries, that's no longer true, it's pretty much crossed over”.*

Policies

Some interviewees shared that gangs in schools have become relatively sophisticated in hiding their gang affiliations as an outcome of school policies. This makes it cumbersome to identify gang membership. According to a principal (cell 14) *“they're getting to be more sophisticated at that. Because when they do that and they fly their colors or they put their graffiti on their notebooks or make it known that they are in a gang, that they have a name, then it's very easy to go and address that. Being in a gang is not against the school rule, the activity connected to gang behavior is. And so they've become more sophisticated about keeping that activity hidden. It's either because they're dealing drugs and they need to keep their clientele or it's because they've just chosen that at this school there's too much to lose”.*

In summary, this section discussed the perceptions of respondents with regard to gangs in school. Some of the issues noted were intimidation, harassment, discipline, attire and accessories. Variations in gang based on gender, age, and ethnicity were also pointed out.

Student crime: Hate crimes

Hate crimes can take many forms in the community and in schools. Environments with hate crimes were discussed as unsafe by the interviewees. Hate crimes based on ethnicity, religion, and gender were discussed by the respondents. Thirty nine percent of the respondents (one aide, ten principals, one SRO, and thirteen teachers) discussed their perceptions in course of the interviewees.

Ethnicity

Hate crimes related to ethnicity were considered the most common by the interviewees. Such hate crimes can be committed directly against the victims or can be indicated through graffiti. Good role models and a strong leadership are important in educating students against race related hate crimes.

Students who believe in hate crimes can be very successful in dividing up students if they are not controlled by the school in a timely manner. A principal (cell 4) revealed one such incident that created an unsafe situation for the students and the school. *“We did have a person come in who thinks he's a nazi, or he is a nazi, and he wants to espouse that*

philosophy. He got in and infiltrated a PE class and was successful in racially dividing the class with Hispanics and Native Americans and Anglos separating themselves. It resulted in some threats and name calling to the extent that there was a couple of fights. The first fight resulted in some suspensions and we weren't really aware of the racist nature. The 2nd fight would have resulted in a student being recommended for expulsion but he withdrew by choice and he took the baseball bat as a weapon to the neo-nazi kid".

Sometimes race related comments are written by way of graffiti and that can lead to fights and safety concerns for students. In the words of a principal (cell 14) *"the hate stuff that we have seen has been by way of graffiti. You get the nazi stuff, you get the direct issues on minorities, I've seen a couple where their views on girls have not been healthy. We have had a couple of incidents with individuals going after each other and the direct reason was race"*.

Not only can students have problems with each other with respect to race, but sometimes such differences can occur between staff also. This can prove to be a negative role model for kids. In the words of a teacher (cell 5) *"there's a lot of tension here that surrounds a particular person and issues of racism in the school. It is at a faculty level, not a student level, and that disturbs me a lot. Allegations of racism and such issues have been stirred up by this particular administrator. It's gotten worse over the last couple years and we have teachers who are taking sides in a most strange way"*.

A strong leadership is very essential in effectively maintaining harmony between students of different races, religions, and genders. In the absence of such leadership, policies on hate crimes can seldom be successful in schools. In the words of a principal (cell 2) *"he had a hard time motivating the mixture of the two groups. We're here together, it's a great multicultural experience for all of us, when you get out in the work field it's not going to be one race only, you're going to have to work with a variety of people. I guess he had a hard time getting the student body to believe in that, to stop talking about each other, stop fighting, stop teasing each other and intimidating each other"*.

Religion

In addition to race, religion is one other common basis for hate crimes in school. It is important for such incidents to be curbed in the initial stages in order to prevent further unsafe developments. One principal (cell 12) agreed with this view. *"Our community is pretty diverse in terms of that kind of religious background but there was a Jewish girl earlier in the year about whom a boy was making comments. Not to her, but just making comments that were inappropriate and the student was concerned. The teacher heard about it and it was addressed very aggressively and it stopped. I think that's part of education, to educate kids that it's not okay and it's not acceptable, and you set the values and make them very clear"*.

Gender

Hate crimes are often directed in schools towards a particular gender or towards people of certain sexual orientations and this can hinder safety to a large extent. According to a principal (cell 5) *“occasionally you may see kids calling each other names, race related names, also the issue of gender issues, homosexuality issues. Name-calling in that regard and sensitivity to that is high, if not higher than race related issues. To middle school kids it's okay if you're Hispanic but it's not okay if you're a homosexual”*.

Outsider

Not only do students engage in hate crimes based on certain racial or religious differences but they are also sometimes slow in accepting new students from a different environment, irrespective of their race or religion. One teacher (cell 3) pointed out that *“it's harder for an outsider coming in, transferring in, and being different. I think kids at first go on personality, if they don't like their personality then it changes into other things like the color of their skin, or they're not wearing the cool clothes, or whatever”*.

In summary, this section discussed the perception of interviewees with respect to hate crimes in schools. Hate crimes based on race, religion, and gender were discussed by the respondents in course of the interviews.

Student crime: Hazing

Many of the high schools interviewed shared a concern with hazing. While hazing can be mild it can also get very serious creating a very unsafe environment for the students. Nineteen percent of the respondents (four principals, three SROs, and five teachers) shared information on hazing at the time of the interviews.

Freshman hazing

Most hazing in schools is mild and does not have unsafe consequences for students. In the words of a teacher (cell 14) even if hazing is mild it needs to be addressed and resolved in order to discourage the culture from gaining momentum. *“They get their heads dunked in the toilet or something like that. But I address those issues at the beginning of the school year and I tell them that they need to make sure that they're not afraid to tell me, another teacher, or somebody if they have a concern like that”*.

In spite of the efforts that go towards preventing hazing it continues to challenge schools, especially freshman hazing. According to a principal (cell 14) *“we generally see freshmen Friday at the beginning of the year. It drives me nuts. It drives me absolutely crazy. The hazing that we've seen is older kids picking on freshmen and it creates a real chilling effect with our freshmen. We notice that for some time they won't use the restroom and they have a tendency to clump together. It really creates a chill effect from the standpoint of safety on campus, kids are a bit more on edge”*.

Sexual assault

Hazing in any form is not acceptable in schools and even more so when it takes the form of sexual assault. Some interviewees shared a concern that such incidents take place in their high schools. One principal (cell 15) shared an incident to support the same. *“Don't understand why it didn't get to us sooner, to a degree there was a code of silence...The perpetrators were older, juniors and seniors and a sophomore. The victims were younger, freshman and sophomore...There are people arguing it wasn't hazing that it went beyond hazing and turned into a sexual assault. Some families knew about it and did not tell us because they didn't know whether to believe their kid or not. It had quite an impact on us and it had a huge impact on the community”*.

In summary, this section discussed the perceptions that the respondents had regarding hazing in their schools. Freshmen hazing and sexual assault were some of the major issues that were discussed by the respondents in course of the interviews.

Student crime: Substance abuse

Substance abuse is of great concern to all schools now, especially middle and high schools. Drugs, alcohol, and tobacco were some of the problems that were discussed by eighty one percent of the respondents (two counselors, three heads of security, fifteen principals, four SROs, and twenty-eight teachers) in course of the interviews.

Drugs

While most of the respondents agreed that a good proportion of their students did not consume drugs there were some that were concerned with the increasing problems that their students were facing with the same. In the words of one head of security (cell 6) *“I see marijuana coming back as the drug of choice for this age group. It's pretty readily available to them, they know where to get it and they can find it. Ninety percent of the kids on this campus choose not to go there, but you're always going to have your small group of kids that want to experiment. They're still pretty young here but when they get into high school I'm sure those numbers get a little higher”*.

On the same lines one principal (cell 7) shared that *“last year there was a lot of drug. The incidents that were drug related were marijuana, there was a lot of possession of paraphernalia, the lighters, the pipes, the bowls, whatever they wanted to call them, whatever they used, the instruments they used to smoke it”*.

Respondents also discussed some other harmful drugs that were being used by their students. One principal (cell 14) noted an increase in the use of LSD. *“We have had two incidents of LSD, which is a cause for great concern”*. A teacher (cell 9) perceived the possibility of increased school crime as an outcome of increased cocaine use among students. *“The advent of cocaine, I would call that a more aggressive drug, is going to cause more behavioral problems than we're seeing. It isn't so much that we have more violence, we have more I think of the threat of violence”*.

Prescription medications may not be considered as harmful as some other drugs but students can get addicted to them and seriously harm themselves. One principal (cell 5) revealed *“we’ve had a few incidents of students bringing not as much alcohol as prescription medication. And we’ve had kids taking it and they are suspended and arrested for it as well”*.

While drugs are problematic in schools it is not easy controlling the same. One principal (cell 15) observed some difficulties in curbing drug problems. *“We know we have drugs, the problem is identifying. A lot of times with the drugs we don’t have the physical hints at what’s going on. We can get the authorities involved but they can’t take action because they’re not sure themselves. By the time they get here sometimes they can’t smell the marijuana, and from what we understand, the only way to verify is the blood test. Well now they’re running into rights of individuals and what not, and it’s very frustrating when we start dealing with suspected drugs use, unlike cigarette or alcohol”*.

Alcohol and tobacco

In addition to drugs, alcohol was the other form of substance abuse that was discussed as most common by the respondents. One teacher (cell 9) pointed out that *“probably ninety plus percent of our students use alcohol, at least on an intermittent basis. Now those are just generalizations but I think I’m pretty accurate, if anything maybe I’m underestimating. People don’t bring alcohol to school just because it’s bulky and it’s too easy to get caught”*.

Another teacher (cell 3) revealed that students can consume alcohol in the school if they go undetected. *“I do know that in one of the classrooms, my first year, that there was a student drinking in the classroom”*.

Smoking is also very common in schools, although the students are careful not to get caught. In the words of a head of security (cell 14) *“tobacco was a big problem but it has gone way down. There’s probably more smoking but they don’t do it at school, the consequences are a little bit stiffer”*.

Behaviors

Some of the respondents discussed the possibility of unsafe behaviors as a consequence of substance abuse and how that could prove to be harmful to students. In the words of one teacher (cell 13) *“it sort of depends on what they’re taking. The two extremes are they get very glassy eyed and sleepy or very feisty. In the past I’ve helped hold a kid down that was freaking out until we could get the police there and an ambulance there to carry him off”*.

Similarly, one another teacher (cell 9) commented *“if a student was using, whether it was alcohol or marijuana, their grades would not be good, they wouldn’t have the ability to concentrate. There would be some striking out, particularly in boyfriend/girlfriend relationships, there might be some verbal abuse and even physical abuse, but that would be primarily with alcohol”*.

One teacher (cell 9) perceived a strong connection between substance abuse and gang affiliation. *“I challenge you to find me a kid involved in gangs, and a kid who's been violent at school who's clean and sober, there isn't going to be one. I think maybe the biggest inroads we can make on the problem is to get kids clean and sober”.*

Variations by time of day

The kind of substance abuse that students engage in seems to vary by time of the day. One principal (cell 5) commented on student involvement with substance abuse when they have free time. *“Sometimes kids bring it on campus in the morning and start distributing when they get on campus before school begins. Morning would be one of the more prevalent times for prescription medication type of thing. And marijuana at lunch time, but also we've had kids come to school under the influence in the morning. So when there's free idle time appears to be the time that they do get involved with those kind of things”.*

Community

A lot of substance abuse takes place in the community and students frequently participate in these activities with their peers outside the school. In the words of a principal (cell 4) *“it's not prevalent on the school grounds or school activities. I think we have teenagers in our school, and probably there are 7th and 8th graders, that I would be pretty certain use drugs and alcohol outside school hours”.*

According to a head of security (cell 14) many students go to parties, like raves, where dangerous drugs are freely available. While schools do not have a control on what students do after school the behaviors can get transported into schools and create safety concerns. *“They have actual cool down rooms, where these kids go in, if they don't pass out, because between the drug and what the music they listen to, they overheat and they just pass out. The helium comes in huge trucks with balloons and these kids just suck the helium. We saw a lot of kids for a while carrying pacifiers, they have their stuff in the pacifier, and they can just suck it. We have a couple kids walking around with butterfly wings. You definitely want to talk to them because they are probably announcing where a party's going to be. That's how they find out, so when we get a hold of that stuff, we give it to the police”.*

In summary, this section discussed the perceptions of various respondents with respect to substance abuse in schools and their influence on students. Drugs, alcohol, and tobacco were some forms of substance abuse that were discussed. Student behavior as a result of substance abuse and influence of parties and the community were also discussed.

Student crime: Theft

Thefts are quite common in schools, especially in locker rooms. Students have also been known to break into rooms and steal. In the modern world of information technology computer hackers have also become of concern to school authorities. Nine percent of the

respondents (one principal, two SROs, and three teachers) discussed theft-related problems in course of the interviews.

Theft

Thefts are common in schools at all levels, especially in locker rooms. Not only do students steal from each other but they can also steal from teachers or staff. One teacher (cell 12) noted that *“just today kids had stuff stolen out of their locker but they didn't lock their locker. There've been a few instances of CD players and jackets stolen in the locker room. I think it happens once or twice a semester. I know one teacher had money stolen the second year we were here”*.

What was of concern to some respondents was the attitude some students have against such kinds of crime. In the words of a teacher (cell 14) *“there is a feeling that you are stupid only if you are caught, there's nothing wrong with stealing and that really bothers me”*.

Break-ins

Most schools experience incidents where students break into rooms, with or without an intention to steal. One teacher (cell 8) mentioned that *“two teachers had rooms broken into a couple of years ago, where they were able to break the window that's in the door and open their doors, and had a couple things stolen”*.

Computer hacking

Computer hacking can become a serious problem in schools as more information goes online and students strive to gain access to the same. One principal (cell 13) shared a hacking incident in the school. *“We dealt with a very intelligent student that got on a computer and somehow, whether it was he doing it or whether a teacher accidentally left the computer logged on, hacked into some programs. Fortunately he didn't download anything, didn't copy anything, but looked at some confidential files. He is suspended from school for a few days and taken out of that class. This could have some ramifications for graduation because we require twenty-four credits to graduate”*.

In summary, this section discussed the concerns of respondents with respect to thefts in schools. Thefts and attitudes towards theft, break-ins, and computer hacking were some of the issues that were brought up by the interviewees.

Student crime: Vandalism and Graffiti

Many respondents, irrespective of whether they were from middle schools or high schools, mentioned that they had encountered graffiti and vandalism in their schools at some point. Forty four percent of the respondents (one bus driver, one head of security, five principals, three SROs, and eighteen teachers) noted issues pertaining to graffiti and vandalism in their schools.

Graffiti

Graffiti was perceived as fairly common across all schools. While most graffiti was caused by students in the school a lot of it had to do with gang symbols and affiliations. According to a head of security (cell 6) bathrooms are the most common place for graffiti and that is where a lot of the cleaning effort is spent. *“We do get graffiti once in a while, usually in the bathrooms. Usually it's very easy to clean up, it might be a lipstick or an ink pen or something like that. Once in a while we'll come back from a weekend and stuff will be sprayed on the doors, on the walls. We just had the school remodeled a few years back and someone came around with spray paint and got all of our walls and so we had to have somebody come in and sandblast all that out. Graffiti's a problem”*.

While graffiti can be of a general nature, it can also display gang affiliations through tagging. Such gang signs can be written by the students themselves or by their gang affiliates from outside the school. In the words of a principal (cell 13) *“one of the things that we have seen on occasion is that they tagged the outside wall on one of the buildings. It wasn't the students but it was older gang members from the area that were doing it. Some of our students that were gang members were very upset because of the fact that they were destroying their school”*.

Vandalism

Graffiti and vandalism seem to go hand in hand in most schools and both are discipline issues that need to be handled promptly. In the absence of control such incidents can become a signal for what is going on, can cause further damage to the school property, and make the general environment unsafe for the students. In support of a preventative philosophy one principal (cell 11) noted that *“we had one student who carved some stuff into one of our desks in the library and we took care of that student with our discipline policy”*.

Incidents of vandalism often occur over breaks, weekends, or after school hours. This could indicate that students opt for such times because the chances of their getting caught are much lower then. It might also be indicative of the fact that the vandals might not be students. In the words of a SRO (cell 5) *“over the school break we had a criminal damage issue where there was rock throwing and there was a gun shot through the window”*.

In summary, this section discussed perceptions of the interviewees with respect to graffiti and vandalism and the implications it can have for school safety.

Student crime: Weapons

Schools are becoming increasingly strict with regard to their weapons policies. Seventy five percent of the respondents (one bus driver, one counselor, three heads of security, ten principals, three SROs, and thirty teachers) discussed weapons in schools. Almost all schools shared incidents with weapons in their schools. While some incidents involved

just finding weapons on the person, others involved use of weapons for intimidation by students. One head of security (cell 9) revealed the kinds of weapons that have been confiscated from students in the school. *“We had brass knuckles, we had knives, two bladed knives, butterfly knives, sniper knives, toy guns, bats”*.

Knives

In course of the interviews knives were discussed as one of the most common weapons in schools. While many of them pointed out that knives were used for intimidation, none of them mentioned knives ever being used by any of the students to harm other students. One principal (cell 5) observed that *“one kid jokingly took a knife and rubbed it against a girl's stomach, and another kid took a knife and held it against another student's neck”*.

Very often the students don't even recognize the danger in their actions with weapons. In the words of a principal (cell 14) *“we've had kids that basically have placed it in their bags and then they forgot it was there. Or they momentarily lose judgment and they pull it out and they're playing with it”*.

Guns/ bullets

Guns are one of the most dreaded weapons in schools given their potential to harm many students at the same time. While some respondents mentioned the prevalence of guns in their schools, they were noted as either not being loaded or as toy guns. It did not seem to be as common a weapon as knives.

One principal (cell 6) shared that *“I've had a gun, but no bullets, I've had some bullets”*. Another teacher (cell 3) pointed out the danger of kids having access to guns, especially if they ever happen to be loaded and can harm other children or staff. *“This was probably about 6-7 years ago. There were two kids in the basketball team who were in 7th or 8th grade. They were in the back of the bus, one kid brought a gun, and they were playing Russian Roulette with a couple of kindergarten kids that were sitting in front of them, just turning the cartridge thing around and then shooting it”*.

Explosives

Some of the respondents shared incidents from their schools when students were found possessing explosives, all the way from firecrackers to pipe bombs. Although none of the schools discussed any serious injury to any student or staff as a result of the explosives, their extreme danger and need for caution was recognized by all. In the words of one teacher (cell 6) *“about a couple weeks ago a kid blew up a fire cracker right at the beginning of school in the morning”*.

Another teacher (cell 13) revealed that *“I had a student once who brought a small pipe bomb. He had it hidden in a long sleeve shirt and that was taken away before anything happened”*.

Some respondents indicated how students imitate incidents that take place in other schools and cause their peers to feel unsafe. One teacher (cell 16) discussed one such case of bomb threat. *“A student did experiments like young kids do. He had done something with making bombs and he said I still do that, after the Columbine incident. It went from I do that or used to do that to he's going to make a bomb to it's going to be planted on campus to it's going to be on this day. We had a significant number of students absent that day from school”*.

Miscellaneous/ accessories

Not only are schools concerned with the obvious weapons like knives, guns, and explosives, but they also have concerns with accessories and other equipment in the school, viz., screwdrivers, bats, that could potentially be used as a weapon.

One principal (cell 9) commented on the dangerous accessories that students tend to wear in school and how they need to be curtailed in order to keep the school safe. *“We've had some chains for a while, the kids were wearing them as belts, but we took them away from them, they're not allowed to wear them. We don't really have a dress code but we told them no it's gang attire, we're not allowing you to wear them. Lately we've had the Marilyn Manson kind of stuff--the rock singer doing the satanic kind of stuff--he wears the spikes and things. I make them take them off because if they wanted to hurt somebody they could”*.

Miscellaneous items in the kid's possession can also be used as weapons and are always a cause for concern to school authorities. One teacher (cell 11) shared that *“one time a kid grabbed a screwdriver and threw it at another kid”*. Another teacher (cell 8) revealed that *“the young man with the baseball bat two years ago was probably the worst. I was involved with that and I stepped in between he and the other student, which our school resource officer told me later I should never do again”* for danger of being hurt too.

Trends

One principal (cell 7) noted a trend in weapon use with respect to time of the year, which could indicate freshman or post-holiday behaviors. *“It was pretty spaced. It usually occurred in the fall, early right when school started and then sometimes it would happen in January or February”*.

Another principal (cell 15) noted that trends constantly change in the schools making it important to keep abreast of all weapon-related issues. *“Every year it is something different. What we're starting to see are climbing rings, they have a d-shaped clip type of a ring. The kids are starting to wear those with their keys. This came out and the kid had it in his hand when he was ready to start fighting”*.

Community influence

Kids are always a reflection of what happens in the family or community. Some respondents perceived that kids are more prone to carrying weapons to the school if they have access to it at home. One teacher (cell 1) perceived *“it goes back to where we live, a lot of kids have gone duck hunting with their parents or have gone deer hunting with their parents and they've been allowed to use, to hold a gun, but not too many”*.

Another teacher (cell 11) pointed out that *“out here a lot of kids carry pocket-knives, that's a normal thing out here. I may be wrong now but I know at one time there was a size limit that the kids could carry to school”*.

In summary, this section discussed the perceptions of respondents with respect to weapons in schools. Knives, guns, explosives, and accessories and miscellaneous objects as weapons were some of the topics that were discussed. The role of community in student attitude towards weapons was also pointed out.

Student behavior and school violence

Students can engage in various behaviors that can determine how safe or unsafe school climate can be. Such behaviors can range all the way from language and attitude to gender variations and imitation of their home and community environments. In course of the interviews ninety four percent of the respondents (two aides, three bus drivers, two counselors, three heads of security, fourteen principals, five SROs, and thirty-one teachers) perceived student behavior as important factors in determining school safety.

Language-based behavior

Verbal and body language are two very powerful tools in the dynamics of school climate. The kinds of words and postures that students choose to use in the school can lead to arguments and fights. Name-calling, bullying, intimidation, and threat were some of the stronger forms of language discussed by the interviewees. Abusive language against staff was also mentioned.

Name calling and bullying were cited as most common by various respondents. In the words of a principal (cell 13) *“the name calling and the bullying are probably what we see more than we do anything else. We see that more in our freshman just because they're immature and that's how they communicate”*.

Various respondents discussed bullying as a major cause for other behavior problems in the future. One teacher (cell 4) revealed *“I had one little boy and when he was in kindergarten I remember thinking this is a gang member in the making because he was verbally a bully. He tended to be and play very rough. I can't say he was abusive, he wasn't hitting anyone, but as he got older he was one of the kids who was involved in the fighting and the bullying in the upper grades, and finally he was suspended”*.

Not only are kids known to use abusive language against other kids in the school but they do the same with teachers and staff also. In the words of one principal (cell 9) *“we have a lot of abusive language and verbal threats toward staff if they're kicked out of class or something like that”*.

Sometimes language is also used to threaten. One teacher (cell 9) discussed a situation where one student threatened another. *“I've heard them say that they've had threats to be beaten up primarily. But most of the times this doesn't materialize, it's verbal threats”*. However, even verbal threats can escalate into fights.

Intimidation was mentioned as an issue in the school by various interviewees. One teacher (cell 1) observed more intimidation and bullying among the younger kids. *“I see intimidation, like bullying, more in the little kids than the older kids but I'm not saying it doesn't happen in the higher grades. When there's bullying in the higher grades our kids always tell on each other and I guess it goes back to what is right and what is wrong”*.

Attitude

Many respondents commented on the attitude problem that many of the kids have in the classroom or school environment. One teacher (cell 15) noted the impact a negative attitude can have on students. *“The language has really gotten a lot courser. I think the threatening attitude of some of the students, the other kids shun them and stay away from them”*.

While many students have an aggressive attitude there are also kids who are fearful and have a very suppressed attitude. One principal (cell 9) revealed that *“sometimes the students will feel fine and then we'll go through a spell where students don't feel safe coming to school. I've had about fifteen or twenty parents who called me since the beginning of the school year saying their child doesn't want to come to school because they're afraid of another kid, a gang member, etc. But that goes in spurts for some reason, I don't know why”*.

Testing limits

Students always try to test their limits to see what they can get away with in the classroom, especially in the beginning of the school year and/ or with a new teacher or staff. In the words of one bus driver (cell 8) students always like to determine their boundaries early in the year. *“In the beginning of the year or when you're first taking over a route and you're trying to get that route into control, there's definitely attitude, they want to see how far they can push or what they can get away with”*.

Many respondents commented that students test their limits by watching the staff and learning about them. This process might give them more confidence to attempt unapproved activities and if the staff is not careful the students might even get away with it. One head of security (cell 14) commented that *“they're watching us as much as we're watching them, which is why a lot of it's just in plain sight”*.

Silence code

Many schools have policies in place to assist students come forward with suspicious information. While some schools are successful in reaching this goal others constantly struggle with students opting for the code of silence. Most students who opt for the code of silence do so because they don't want to provide information to adults that will get their peers into trouble. One principal (cell 13) stated that *"there are some students who wouldn't give up a friend or somebody because they'd then be considered a nark. But the silent witness program is well publicized and if they don't want to give up information to an individual they call a phone number and leave information and then we can follow it up"*.

While many students do not feel comfortable disclosing information about their peers to the adults there are always some who come forward with useful and timely clues. According to one head of security (cell 14) *"a lot of times the kids are our best allies. They tell us a lot of what's going on so we know what to look for"*.

Some respondents noted that in spite of repeated discussions at the school level there are instances where the student wants to share information with an adult but is unsure of where to go and what to do. This could be an outcome of kids paying attention to policy information on a need to know basis. One principal (cell 15) shared *"from my perspective teachers, aides, SROs, the counselor, the student advisor, the assistant principal, and I are available. But from the kids' perspective it's much different. Sometimes they don't know who to go to even after we tell them who they need to talk to for certain things. Some of the kids talk to their friends and then the friend will bring it to someone's attention. Sometimes they'll talk to the family and sometimes they don't talk to anybody. What we're seeing frequently is parents or kids coming in and telling us we're having a problem with this but don't tell anybody and not to take action"*.

Age/ grade variations

The respondents discussed variations in student behavior based on their age groups and grade levels. There was consensus that students from middle school were more prone to acting out than their high school counterparts. According to a head of security (cell 6) *"The sixth graders this year have really surprised me. I've had more issues with sixth graders this year with knives and marijuana than the seventh and eighth grade combined. So they're getting younger"*.

A principal (cell 16) supported a similar idea with respect to the freshman getting into trouble. *"Our biggest problem in our school is freshman and their transition into high school. We're strict and we have high academic standards, yet our biggest problem is getting freshman into what our expectations are and into the mold. What we notice is that after their freshman year there's a marked precipitous decline in discipline problems all the way to the senior year"*.

Following a similar thought one principal (cell 9) reasoned why the seniors might not act out as much as their juniors. *"You don't see as many of the drugs and the fights with the*

seniors because they're more focused on getting out and graduating. With seventh graders, believe it or not, you actually see a lot of fighting and drugs because it's a new territory for them".

Gender variations

Gender based variations in student behavior were observed by respondents. While girls were perceived as having frequent verbal fights spread over a longer period of time, boys were perceived as having more physical fights and for a relatively shorter duration of time.

In the words of one teacher (cell 9) girls very often have longer misunderstandings over relationships while boys tend to have shorter fights and tend to be more physical. *"With girls it's usually interpersonal relationships, whether it's boys or not. There's a lot of name calling among the girls that you don't see with the boys. I think with the girls it'll go a little longer, they'll let it burn and finally when they do fight they're so mad they don't want to quit fighting. Boys tend to be more physical and their fights are a lot easier to break up because usually you get a hand on each one and they'll stop fighting. They'll keep posturing and that will go on for a long time after the fight. Guys will usually get mad quicker, and get over it quicker. A lot of times the guys fight will be over something that happened this morning or yesterday or last week. You probe a girls fight and it started many years ago".*

Personal baggage

Various interviewees discussed the personal baggage that many kids bring with them to school. Some of the issues that were brought up were incidents that take place in the kids' home, violence, the feeling of failure, etc., and how these issues add to the personal baggage that kids carry. In the words of one teacher (cell 15) the kind of problems and personal baggage that kids carry determines what goes on in their minds, which can potentially land these kids in trouble. *"The students have really changed. Their attitudes, the luggage they bring with them to school has gotten heavier, they have a lot more problems, and who knows what's going on in their minds".*

One principal (cell 4) discussed the feeling of failure that some students have and how that can hinder their academic performance and general feeling of well being. *"Students who are not successful in school, for whatever reason, will tend to seek other avenues to do things. Research shows that ethnic minorities are underachieving drastically, and I think lack of school success translates into getting in trouble in other ways. And students who are not ethnic minorities that experience lack of school success end up the same way".*

A principal (cell 5) pointed out that some students are deeply impacted by what happens in their personal lives at home. *"I think it has a negative impact on their achievement because they're thinking about what happened last night or what's going to happen today. Luckily we have resiliency and initiative going on at the school".* This is beneficial because such issues left unattended could lead to safety concerns with students.

Imitation of negative community behavior

Many times kids imitate behaviors of their peers and family members. If those influences are negative or harmful then kids can get into trouble by indulging in the same at school. One teacher (cell 3) discussed one such situation of learned behavior. *“I asked her what she was doing that for. The response was well she was taking care of me so I will just follow what she does. It is the influence of their older brothers and sisters who are trying to be cool and things like that, so it carries over sometimes to the middle school. Also, they lose hope, so it can be a struggle to get them to realize that there's potential out there and they don't have to follow what everybody else is doing”.*

Academic performance

Some of the respondents noted a correlation between student behavior and academic performance. One teacher (cell 13) commented on the relationship between suspension and grades. *“If a student's in a fight, and gets suspended, then usually the grades drop because not all students are responsible enough to make up the work that they've missed, so that's a typical thing”.*

On the contrary students can also display behavior problems because they are not succeeding academically. One teacher (cell 2) observed *“you're going to find more misbehavior in kids that aren't performing academically well, as a general rule from what I've been able to see. A lot of it is frustrations, they may have gaps in their education and they act out with smart-aleck talk, being a bit cocky, or putting other kids down. A lot of that I think is a self-esteem issue and they try to use other defense mechanisms to cover it up. I've also never felt that the way we structure our schools really does justice to the kids that get behind or not able to keep up”.*

Sexual behavior

School kids take part in various sexual behaviors at school. While kids are always at risk of being abused, girls always face the danger of getting pregnant. While such behaviors may or may not be violent they are still unsafe for kids of school age. One head of security (cell 6) observed the danger from sexual behavior by younger school kids. *“Just about every year or every other year we have a little girl get pregnant, at least one, and sometimes two. And a lot of times it's in the eighth grade and they end up having the baby after they leave here or in their freshman year of high school”.*

On similar lines one principal (cell 5) discussed a situation of sexual abuse in the school and related complications. *“We had a situation where after an event at night a group of students went around to the side of the building and one of the girls involved performed oral sex. That was a major incident because of racial lines and the question of whether or not it was voluntary”.*

Sexual abuse often takes place in the community or home and the outcome is seen at the school. It is very essential to recognize symptoms of sexual abuse in order to provide

students with meaningful assistance. One teacher (cell 2) observed a female student's behavior as an outcome of abuse. *"She wears her coat all the time and she won't ever take it off. I don't ever press her, normally I probably would say it's too hot take your coat off, but I just leave her"*.

In summary, this section discussed perceptions on student behavior and how it correlates with school safety. Language used by students, student attitude, testing of limits by students, silence code, grade and gender variations, the personal baggage that students carry, learned behavior from family, academic performance, and sexual behavior were some of the topics that were discussed by the respondents in course of the interviews.

Student triggers for school violence

Various interviewees shared their perceptions on the trigger points or events that most frequently lead to full-fledged school violence. Forty two percent of the respondents (one bus driver, eleven principals, one SRO, and fourteen teachers) agreed that it was relatively small events that most frequently triggered any kind of fight or violence in their schools.

Relationships

One of the most commonly cited trigger points by almost all interviewees was male-female relationships. One SRO (cell 16) stated that *"seventy percent of the fights are over either girls fighting over a boy or boys fighting over a girl, and that's roughly what it is"*.

Gossip/ Misunderstanding

Another common cause as perceived by the interviewees seems to be gossip among students and resulting misunderstandings. One principal (cell 5) agreed with this view. *"I would say it's hearsay. So and so said this so and so said that--and probably meaningless, but that's the trigger point. It's misunderstanding and just hearsay and kids wanting to see students get into conflict. Because they know this person gets off on that, so they'll go up to them and get them off, just for the fun of it, to promote violence to a degree"*.

Another principal (cell 15) shared a similar observation that *"the most common reason for violence on the campus is gossip. Somebody told somebody that they thought that he was stepping out with his girl and so and so said he's gonna beat them up. That is by and large the most common occurrence of violence on this campus"*.

Mad-dogging

Most interviewees agreed that mad-dogging, or staring at somebody coldly, is another common trigger for fights in schools. One principal (cell 9) revealed one such incident involving mad-dogging. *"They had a fight over some silly thing. Somebody looked at them the wrong way or something like that, and one girl had huge lumps on her head and*

her eye was damaged pretty badly. If somebody looks at them the wrong way they'll make comments. So a lot of fights happen for something like that".

A teacher from the same school observed a continuum all the way from mad-dogging through fights. *"Usually it starts with stares then goes to words and lots of name calling. Then pretty soon someone hits somebody and often times all of that will transpire within thirty seconds".* In the teachers perception the logic used is *"well by looking at us they must have meant something. So now we got to watch out for them and maybe we better do something to them because they're gonna do something to us if we don't. That is the biggest problem. Students don't perceive themselves able to get themselves out of a situation or to de-escalate a situation. They both lack the skills or even the inclination of wanting to do so. They feel they have to retaliate because otherwise they're seen as having backed down and that just emboldens their opponent".*

Language

The kind of language that kids use can be a very powerful tool in triggering or deterring fights in a school environment. One teacher (cell 5) perceived that *"what triggers the fights is the trash talking that they do. Putting kids down, ridiculing, and talking inappropriately to each other--that's where the shoving matches start. A lot of times it's just somebody saying something and then the kids feel that they have to stand up for. The big one is he said something about my mother, they feel like they have to stand up for themselves".*

Another teacher (cell 14) commented that *"they think that it's just innocent teasing and then from there one will say one thing, the other one will reply, and then pretty soon then it becomes a verbal, then they start taunting each other. So it seems like one thing builds on another thing. They don't realize that they're making fun of another person's sister or brother or girlfriend or something like that".*

Family/ community fights

Families and communities have a very strong influence on kids and very often they extend family/ community conflicts into the school. One principal (cell 9) commented that *"usually with the boys' fights it'll be some sort of a retaliation thing, at least that's what I've seen this year. Something that happened either here at school or some place else out in the community. And they're retaliating for a friend or a brother or something else".*

On a similar note a teacher (cell 10) listed some of the common contributing factors for fights as *"family background and of course friends too, which can be included in the neighborhood".*

Gangs/ Groups

Gang affiliations are of high importance to its' members even within school premises. They tend to congregate in groups and take sides during arguments. The principal in one school (cell 3) noted such a trend. *"Well I think if you have two different gangs at school, that's a big problem. One of the problems that we've seen is, and often times it's still gang*

related, it would be problems between friends. You'll have a clique of one, and it's usually girls, who would say they looked at me funny, they've been talking about me behind my back".

Another principal (cell 15) shared that one of the common reasons for a fight is *"because of their affiliation with a gang, or their hanging with somebody affiliated with a gang".*

In summary, romantic relationships between students, gossip, inappropriate use of language, mad-dogging, gangs, and an extension of family conflicts to the school, were some of the triggers to school fights as perceived by the interviewees.

While schools might not be in a position to resolve most community and parental factors with respect to school violence, they might be more successful in controlling many of the student factors related to school violence. It is very useful for schools to be aware of all their student factors so that they can try and accommodate related information into their policy discussions and can design programs tailored to their own local needs.

This concludes this section on student influence on school safety. The following section discusses perceptions pertaining to school factors and their impact on school safety.